

## **HUGE CROWD OF FOSTER PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS ATTEND CONFERENCE**

More than more than 560 people assembled at Ocean Shores September 25-7 for the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual Foster Parents and Caregivers Conference. They met under the theme, ““Together We Achieve the Extraordinary - Honoring Those Who Care For and Support Children.”

“The key word is ‘together,’ ” said Lyman Legters of Casey Family Programs, who was master of ceremonies for the 2 ½-day event.

In honor of that theme, kinship caregivers were invited for the first time. 287 scholarships were given to allow foster parents and caregivers to attend – the largest number ever. 70 scholarships were provided for kinship caregivers and 217 for foster parents.

The conference featured 50 workshops of 90 minutes each presented by more than 60 professional and volunteer trainers who donated their time and expenses. These workshops provided training that foster parents and caregivers need for the work they do. The trainings earned great reviews by all participants.

The Ocean Shores location also was favored by participants. It received a 4.5 rating out of 5 on evaluations. There were many “firsts” at the conference. This is the first time it was held at an ocean location, for example. The location fit into the goal of the planning committee to create a conference that provided education in a fun and relaxing setting.

Among the highlights of the conference:

- Keynote speaker Denise Goodman of Annie E. Casey Foundation talked passionately and humorously about the need for collaboration between state staff and caregivers. A former foster parent and social worker, Goodman spoke of the need for true teamwork. She said Clydesdale horses individually can pull 8,000 pound-loads; together, they can pull a 25,000 pound load. The same is true of social workers and caregivers, she said.
- The importance of diversity was stressed by the Diversity Dance Workshop, a troupe of dancers from Seattle. Alumni from the troupe reunited to perform at the conference. Dances raised awareness about race, abuse, poverty and the theme of our common humanity.
- An inspiring music/photo journal of adoptive family pictures was created and designed by Andrew Morrison, son of Children’s Administration staff member Carolyn Jones.
- 12-year-old Lainey Rodriguez, adopted at two months by her mother Jan Hinkel-Rodriguez, a trainer for Children’s Administration, wowed the crowd with her voice and tremendous stage presence. “Get your autographs now because they are going to be worth a lot later,” Legters told the crowd.
- Families for Kids, instrumental in the success of the conference, collaborated with Children’s Administration in doing a mock makeover of Bob Partlow, a planning committee member. The “makeover” was coordinated by Nancy Underwood-Long of FFK. She related Bob’s makeover to the transformation of children who receive time and attention of our great foster and kinship caregivers.
- The new Assistant Secretary of Children’s Administration, Cheryl Stephani opened the conference and welcomed the honored caregivers. Also expressing support for caregivers was state Rep. Ruth Kagi, a long-time champion for children and Danielle Baxter, co president of the newly restructured Foster Parent Association of Washington spoke about their advocacy for foster families.

- Sunday evening included humorous entertainment by comedian Pat Cashman. After dinner some participants continued the fun by going to the beach to compete in the regional “Beach Buggy Races” followed by a huge bonfire which allowed folks to network and socialize in a relaxed environment. Throughout the conference a regional competition was conducted with a cookie contest, miniature golf, beach buggy races, and a contest to see which region wrote was most creative in ending the sentence: “You know you’re a foster parent when...” Look for the list here on the foster parent web site: <http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/> Region 2 exhibited great spirit throughout the competitions and received the most points and the first annual revolving trophy.
- Foster care alumni Meriah Williams joined Bob Partlow to present a beautiful wooden plaque in the shape of Washington State to KIRO Radio. KIRO was honored for 17 years working with Children’s Administration to provide gifts from the community for foster children through the Foster Child Holiday Magic program. Every year, a community partner will be honored at the conference.
- Two foster care alumni speakers, Martin Sepulveda, and Chereese Phillips talked about their experiences in foster care. Foster care alumni Mary Herrick of the Washington Education Foundation talked about the foundation’s Governor’s Scholarship Program for kids in foster and kinship care.
- Participants also met for informal chats with fellow caregivers and administrators from the six DSHS regions.
- Families for Kids, headed by Daryl Daus, provided hundreds of free gifts and books that were donated by the community. Nancy Underwood-Long was instrumental in getting these prizes donated. The conference was concluded by FFK grand prize drawings of several student computers and a weekend at the Ocean Shores Shilo Inn.

Participants voted on the location for next year’s conference, tentatively scheduled for eastern Washington. Spokane finished first with 85 votes, although 74 want to return to Ocean Shores. Wenatchee and Yakima finished 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>.

Two people summed up the spirit and passion of the convention.

A foster parent came up to four committee members preparing to leave after the conference. Her voice choked with emotion, she said, “I have been taking care of kids for a while and I’ve always felt isolated and that nobody else was going through what I was going through or knew what I was going through. This is my first conference I’ve been to and now I just feel,” she stopped, searching for the right word and then said: “I just feel so **empowered**. I feel like I can continue taking care of kids, that there are others who are there for me.”

Joshua Roberts, a key volunteer, said the conference had a strong effect on him and his wife Leilani. Joshua wrote, “Leilani said to me that when she looked around the room and saw the hundreds of caregivers in the room she didn’t see people dressed in super hero outfits, but she saw regular, everyday people who all shared a common goal: to help our children. This conference was very moving for her, opened her eyes and gave her the support she was looking for.”

We thank all our foster parents and caregivers for all they do. Every day, they achieve the extraordinary.